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**Review: *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce.*  
Slavoj Žižek. New York: Verso, 2009. 157pp.**

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Two relatively recent events have arguably been among the most influential in the contemporary global politico-economic climate. The terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> helped to usher in a climate of fear in the West and renewed war in the Middle East. Slavoj Žižek writes: “September 11 heralded an era in which new walls were seen emerging everywhere: between Israel and the West Bank, around the European Union, along the US-Mexico border, but also within nation-states themselves” (Žižek 2009:3). Eight years later, the global economic crisis of 2008 precluded a further cementing of those divisions between the wealthy and the poor – the haves and the have-nots. Žižek uses these two events that help to define the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a jumping-off point from which he details the roots and reasons for what he calls the coming catastrophe to be brought on by today’s global capitalism. Further, he attempts this analysis from a point of view outside of the capitalist system: “How does our predicament today look from the perspective of the communist idea?” (Žižek 2009:6). In this approach, he lays the groundwork for his argument that communism remains not only a viable option, but perhaps the only option for humanity to avoid the catastrophes being brought on by

global capitalism.

Žižek's dialectic approach engages numerous scholars who have commented on the current state of global humanity, capitalism, and socialism. Through this dialectic, a larger reality – one beyond the immediacy of our everyday lives – is revealed, and it becomes clear that Capitalism appears to be near its end-point. Žižek begins with a commentary on the rapid expansion of the gap between the rich and the poor. He describes the rise of a global super-rich, who are increasingly insulating themselves from the masses of the lower class. In describing a Chinese suburb that replicates an English town and was designed for the wealthy, he notes: "There is no longer a hierarchy of social groups within the same nation – residents in this town live in a universe for which, within its ideological imaginary, the 'lower class' surrounding world simply *does not exist*" (Žižek 2009:5). The Poor's role in the world of the wealthy, then, becomes their very non-existence – they only exist in their non-existence.

Still, as evidenced by the economic crisis of 2008, the rich have not been immune to the problems of the global capitalism that helped to create their wealth. In describing the government bailout that occurred after the financial meltdown, Žižek asks:

Is the bail-out plan really a 'socialist' measure then, the birth of state socialism in the US? If it is, it is a very peculiar form: a 'socialist' measure whose primary aim is not to help the poor, but the rich, not those who borrow, but those who lend. In a supreme irony, 'socializing' the banking system is acceptable when it serves to save capitalism. Socialism is bad – except when it serves to stabilize capitalism (Žižek 2009:13)

From this position, it becomes clear that the lower classes' well-being has become inextricably linked to the healthy wallets of the rich. Žižek notes, "What keeps Main Street going under capitalism is Wall Street" (Žižek 2009:14).

Yet, the reality that such a connection implies – that the poor will not do well unless the rich are doing well – has not resulted in any mobilization of the lower classes. "The primary immediate effect of the crisis [of 2008] will not be the rise of a radical emancipatory politics," Žižek explains, "but rather the rise of racist populism, further wars, increased poverty in the poorest Third World countries, and greater divisions between the rich and the poor within all societies" (Žižek 2009:17). Worse, in the US at least, a segment of the lower classes – the populist conservatives – are blindly supporting their own financial demise. Žižek contends: "The populist conservatives are literally voting themselves into economic ruin. Less taxation and deregulation means more freedom for the big companies who are driving impoverished farmers out of business; less state intervention means less federal help for small businessmen and entrepreneurs" (Žižek 2009:33). Žižek seeks to understand how a class has been hoodwinked

into supporting a political ideology that goes against their own self-interests: “Indeed, who needs direct repression when one can convince the chicken to walk freely into the slaughterhouse?” (Žižek 2009:34). To explore this occurrence, Žižek employs a critique of ideology.

The ideology of capitalism in the West has effectively captured the minds of many in the lower class, and, in fact, has normalized Capitalist society to the point that no other options appear to be possible. Capitalism then, despite its recognized problems, appears as the best option for human society, and further, it offers the best chance for humanity to solve the many pressing concerns mentioned above. Žižek continues: “This is indeed how ideology functions today: nobody takes democracy or justice seriously, we are all aware of their corrupted nature, but we participate in them, we display our belief in them, because we assume that they work even if we do not believe in them” (Žižek 2009:51). Within this system we have the illusion of free choice, when, in fact, our choices are limited by the Capitalist system in which we exist. Without knowledge of other possibilities, our decisions are further limited, and thus we participate in the perpetuation of the system. “We find ourselves constantly in the position of having to decide about matters that will fundamentally affect our lives, but without a proper foundation in knowledge” (Žižek 2009:63), explains Žižek. The illusion of free choice is granted to the public at large, and thus an endless ability to create and recreate our own identity sustains the hegemonic consumerist ideology.

Žižek’s dialectical critique effectively sketches out the core substance of the capitalist ideology that not only caused the current crisis, but also shaped our understanding of and response to it. From this base, Žižek calls for a reconsideration of communism in addressing these larger global problems. He urges for a “return to the beginning,” wherein we (social actors, philosophers, academics, intellectuals, etc.) do not build off of the communisms of the recent past, but instead begin again from the central tenets of Marxist theory and start anew. In this effort, he describes the challenge inherent in the task of utilizing communism as a framework to move forward in our current crisis: “If we conceive of communism as an ‘eternal Idea,’ this implies that the situation which generates it is no less eternal, i.e., that the antagonism to which communism reacts will always exist” (Žižek 2009:88). In other words, if communism arises out of the confusions of capitalism, then for communism to exist, capitalism, as its antagonist, must also exist.

Žižek continues this line of inquiry: “The only true question today is: do we endorse the predominant naturalization of capitalism, or does today’s global capitalism contain antagonisms which are sufficiently strong to prevent its indefinite reproduction?” (Žižek 2009:90-91). In answering this question, he proposes four core potential antagonisms to the global capitalism of

today: an ecological catastrophe, conflicts around private property and intellectual property, ethical implications of technological developments, and the “rise of new forms of apartheid” (Žižek 2009:91), that last of which is critical to moving toward a new communism. The crucial nature of the last potential conflict lies in the nature of the others: capitalism could possibly solve the other conflicts and perpetuate its own existence. However, addressing the growing divide between the lower classes and the rich will prove much more difficult for capitalism, and may be a problem that only a communist solution can address.

In this spirit, Žižek proposes a radicalization of the proletarian subject. He refers to the wider concept of “the commons” that potentially includes all types of people coming from various perspectives of the lower classes who realize they share a common distinction: an imminent zero-point in which fundamental change will be inevitable. “The commons” then supplant the simple dichotomy proposed by Marx – that of the proletariat and the owners – and represents a “singular universality of the proletariat” (Žižek 2009:95). He clarifies: “There is nothing more ‘private’ than a state community which perceives the Excluded as a threat and worries how to keep them at a proper distance” (Žižek 2009:97). Concerning this present situation of increasing privatization, Žižek elucidates: “When ‘immaterial work’ (education, therapy, etc.) is celebrated as the kind of work which directly produces social relations, one should not forget what this means within a commodity economy: namely, that new domains, hitherto excluded from the market, are now commodified” (Žižek 2009:144). He explains how this commoditization of the “general intellect” was not predicted by Marx, and thus necessitates the need to transform this area of Marx’s work. He describes this new appropriation of the general intellect as the development of rent-for-profit, which has resulted in a fracturing of the proletariat into three distinct groups: the intellectual class, the traditional working class, and the outcasts (such as the unemployed). This division of the working class has left those occupying those social spaces as unable to identify a common ground with the other respective classes. In fact, these three “classes” are played against each other, further alienating themselves from each other.

In his discussion of how to overcome this alienation within and between the lower classes, Žižek begins to sound a bit apocalyptic:

We have to accept that, at the level of possibilities, our future is doomed, that the catastrophe will take place, that it is our destiny – and then, against the background of this acceptance, mobilize ourselves to perform the act which will change destiny itself and thereby insert a new possibility into the past. Paradoxically, the only way to prevent the disaster is to accept it as inevitable. (Žižek 2009:151)

This vision of impending doom, while used to make a point, remains firmly in the realm of

conjecture, as the said catastrophe has yet to take place. Žižek risks characterization as a type of doomsday soothsayer by utilizing this type of speculation and the referencing of humans' destiny. In the end though, Žižek grounds his argument, and refers to the popular phrase "we are the ones we have been waiting for" to imply that there is not going to be some figurehead or massive event that will save us from the coming catastrophe. Instead, it will take a re-engaging with communism, a beginning anew. It cannot be a return to 20<sup>th</sup> Century communism, but an effort that begins from the foundations, and takes as a starting point the reality in which we exist at present.

Overall, Žižek's latest book is a compelling account of how Western capitalist society has reached the present point of impending catastrophe. His call for a reconsideration of a communist solution is rooted in a deep belief in the communist system as elucidated by Marx. Still, as mentioned above, Žižek recognizes in today's environment places from which we must depart and build upon Marx. He briefly mentions – and even praises – Hugo Chavez and his efforts in Venezuela as well as Evo Morales in Bolivia. However, he fails to explain his views on these country's movements that are alternative to the global capitalism of the West. Further, he does not clarify how, and if, these two movements fit into the potential future of a broader communist movement. Similarly, Cuba was left out of the conversation, despite its prolonged communist experiment. Still, Žižek's use of Marx and Marxist ideas in his critique of the capitalist experiment brings Marxism back into the present debate about the direction of today's global human society. He stops short, however, of explaining what a global communist alternative might look like.

## Reference

Žižek, Slavoj (2009) *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, New York: Verso.